TL6554-06

Rep. Nita Lowey at UN Decol. Comittee

Statement by U.S. Representative Nita M. Lowey, Democrat, New York

Delivered by Congressional aide Jonathan Birenbaum at the U.N. Decolonization Committee, July 13, 1994

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee of 24, thank you for this opportunity to address the Special Committee on Decolonization.

The fundamental right of a people to choose its own government has always had strong resonance for Americans. The principle of self-determination is rooted in the idealism of Woodrow Wilson, and codified in the Charter of the United Nations. Coupled with decolonization, it has been a major force of democratization around the world.

It is clear that the people of East Timor have never known this right; they have never had the opportunity to elect their own officials or to determine their own futures. They were freed in 1975 from Portugal's colonial yoke only to be burdened with that of Indonesia less than a year later. Numerous human rights abuses now add greatly to the outrage we must feel at their situation.

As a United Nations member and a world leader, the United States must help to enforce the U.N. Charter. As a democracy, we take particular interest in its self-determination provisions. In both of these roles, we must take a strong and coherent stand against the Indonesian presence in East Timor.

In the past, the United States has opted for a balancing act; we have weighed economic and military goals against humanitarian ones, believing that cooperation with the Indonesian government would induce it to expand human rights.

Administrations since 1975 have taken this approach, and it has failed. According to reports from international human rights groups including Amnesty International and Asia Watch, the Indonesian government has not seriously investigated human rights claims or moved toward compliance with 1993 recommendations of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Mr. Chairman, the United Nations must now take a stronger stand. Rather than allowing ourselves to be put off by the possible consequences of antagonizing Indonesia, we should recall the successful stands we took against repression in South Africa. our stubborn insistence on human rights guarantees let us watch as government changed and its people reclaimed their rights.

As the Commission on Human Rights has done in the past, we must continue to urge Indonesia to open East Timor to investigators and journalists. Their reports are invaluable in pointing out to the rest of the world the Indonesian government's weaknesses and lack of support at home.

Indonesia is clearly concerned with its public image; a judge sentenced Fernando Araujo in 1992 to nine years imprisonment for "disgracing the nation in the eyes of the international community." We must make clear to Indonesia that the way to eliminate embarrassing criticism is not to suppress the critics but to reform treatment of the accused and prisoners.

Reports alone are not enough, though they help to rally international support. We must also be willing to press hard to ensure that Indonesia's leaders act on the Commission's recommendations, that they are not only aware of their failings but also working to correct them. They must recognize the rights of the Timorese people, and we must oblige them to do so. As the United States House Appropriations Committee has urged, we must put force behind our words, for example, by completely cutting off arms sales until they comply.

As the imprisoned leader of the East Timorese independence movement, Xanana Gusmao said, "The so-called Indonesian provisional government was formed over the corpses of the Timorese massacred," in December 1975. Despite the Indonesian government's claims to the contrary, there has been no valid act of Timorese self-determination. Nor can "cultural differences" obscure the government's abuses. Detention of prisoners without legitimate trials and government complicity in massacres is criminal wherever in the world they occur.

We must solidify our position. Indonesia must be made to recognize that the human rights of the Timorese, and of its own citizens, are non-negotiable. Only a referendum among the East Timorese themselves can legitimately determine their status.

Until the people's votes are counted and their voices heard, the international community and its principle of self-determination cannot be satisfied.

Mr. Chairman, I appeal to this Committee, to the United States, and to the rest of the world to recognize the clear danger to universal human rights that Indonesia's flagrant violations present. In standing up for the rights of the East Timorese, we will be standing for the rights of all free peoples.

Thank you.